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ABSTRACT

Presents the evolution of participation programs for Head Start parents which were conducted by the University of Hawaii Center for Research in Early Childhood Education from 1967-1968 through 1970. Each year's shifting emphasis was based on experience with programs tried earlier, on shifting interests of staff and particular communities involved in other aspects of the year's research program, and on aspects of the overall research design of that year. Programs of group meetings and individual home visits were explored. Various types of parent participation programs in conjunction with curricular modules in the cognitive and motivational realms were assessed. The major conclusion is that broad generalization is not possible from small and short term attempts to alter parental attitudes and practices. Parent programs may not be the most effective way to improve cognitive abilities and behavior of preschool children. (Author/WY)

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Programs of Head Start Parent Involvement in Hawaii*
A Section of the Final Report for 1969-70

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PROGRAMS OF HEAD START PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HAWAII
Center for Research in Early Childhood Education

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The programs of Head Start parent involvement to be considered here represent only those conducted by what is now the University of Hawaii Center for Research in Early Childhood Education. The history of the concern of this Center in parent participation goes back to 1967-68. Several types of programs that have been developed, tried out, and to the extent feasible evaluated since that time will be described. Each year's programs have been based in part upon experience with ones tried in previous years. Some shifting emphases and techniques, however, have been attributable to perceived successes and problems with earlier programs and to the availability of staff members with particular interests.

A very important consideration each year has been how particular types of parent programs fit into the overall design of the research studies of the Center for that year. In addition, practical realities of what types of programs can be hoped to enlist the needed participation of available groups of parents and to be palatable to school, community agency, and other concerned personnel must be taken into account. It may also be stated at this point that parents of children in a given classroom, Head Start Center, school district, or geographical or political area usually are not amenable to random disposition in matters affecting their own interests and efforts. Hence those who expect clean-cut, neatly documented statements of statistically significant differences between treatment and control groups, to which individuals were randomly assigned, will be disappointed.

To begin with the 1967-68 project, one of the principal early aims of Head Start research efforts in Hawaii had been related to enhancement of

cognitive skills through fostering of linguistic development, especially because of the prevalence of a non-standard dialect of English among the children. Often it has been suggested that deficiencies in the language development of children from low-income families are in part mediated through the failure of the mothers to regard themselves as teachers of their children and to use effective teaching strategies in communicating knowledge to their children.

The plan, therefore, was to combine a parent education program with a specially designed language curriculum to be taught by regular classroom teachers. The parent program was expected to interpret the language curriculum to the mother and then to encourage her to assume a teaching role with her own child in order to strengthen the concepts at which the curriculum had been aiming. Of the eight classes that had the language curriculum and the eight classes pre- and post-tested for purposes of comparison, four each became involved in a parent education program. Parent education staff from the Research Center met for periods of one and a half hours on four consecutive days with parents from each of the eight classes. Early emphasis was on training parents to help in supervising classroom activities, explaining the overall curricular programs, and developing positive attitudes toward school. Later, emphasis shifted to the teaching role of a parent and to particular instructional materials. Films and slides were presented, and role-playing was used. Attendance fell off markedly after the intensive orientation period. Parents forgot, they were ill, a child was ill, they had other commitments, and so on.

Since a parent program with no parents is vacuous, several modifications were tried. First, at three Head Start Centers, six intensive sessions were scheduled at the beginning of the spring semester. Attendance picked up

significantly, probably partly because of the momentum engendered by frequent meetings, partly because concrete reinforcers in the form of stainless steel flatware were introduced, and partly because certificates of participation were issued. Second, one preschool parent group was divided into three smaller groups, two of which met in homes, with a Center staff member attending each meeting. Attendance did not increase. Third, three mothers were trained to interpret to others content presented to them by Center staff. Attendance at their meetings did not improve.

In the course of group meetings, it had become evident that active response of parents was facilitated if meetings were introduced through conversation between two Center staff members instead of having a single leader. Following this insight, two Center staff members attended each group meeting. Subjective evaluation argued in favor of this team-teaching approach as well as for use of role-playing versus lectures and for concrete reinforcers such as refreshments and certificates of participation.

The children in all classes were given several instruments on a pre- and post-test basis. It had been expected that parents in the special programs would be able to improve their children's vocabulary, through specially constructed games and activities that required labeling. Though trends for the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities were in the predicted direction, differences between children of participating and non-participating parents were not statistically significant. Analysis of covariance to compare test performance for children of parents participating in more than one-third and less than one-third of the meetings showed no significant test differences. The former group of parents, however, did reveal improved attitudes and information regarding child development, as determined from a questionnaire.

Thus, although insight had been gained into aspects of parent programs that could be expected to enhance their appeal, the potential effects on the child's performance on language-related criterion measures had not been verified.

In 1968-69 the Hawaii Center conducted two studies on parent programs. The first had to do with what was called a parent awareness program, the purpose being to explore the feasibility of group meetings of Head Start mothers that are focused on understanding of self and others. Programs were used with two groups, one for 17 weeks and the other for 27 weeks. Specific objectives were that mothers would become more aware of needs and feelings of others; that they would develop a greater awareness of themselves, including an understanding of their strengths, assets, and the effect of their behavior on others; and that they would learn explicit techniques to improve communication skills that would in turn result in better interpersonal relationships.

Two parent educators took the role of facilitators for the informal group discussions in helping the mothers try out new ways of handling problems and of expressing themselves in the group session. Focuses of the discussions included parent-child relationships; methods of discipline; communication skills; self-knowledge; marital status; heterosexual relationships; drug, alcohol, and glue-sniffing addiction; and racial feelings. When appropriate, the parent educators introduced audio-visual media, handouts, and role-playing exercises to expand discussion.

The results, although not primarily statistical in nature, clearly indicated that such a program was feasible and even enthusiastically welcomed for the parent groups in question and with the leadership of the particular Center staff members involved. It should be mentioned, however, that these

staff members had had experience in group therapy, in sensitivity training, and in other kinds of group work with adults. Leaders lacking such qualifications might not be so successful, and favorable results might even be attributable to other characteristics of the particular leaders. Moreover, it should be remarked that the possibility of such a program depends highly upon willingness to participate, which may vary from one community or ethnic group to another in the same city or general environment.

The individuals that did commit themselves quite regularly attended the frequent meetings. But a research enterprise cannot simply assign parents to such a demanding program. No attempt was made to explore in depth how effective such a treatment might be in comparison with no treatment or other types of parent programs. The tentative evaluation relied heavily on data gathered from the participants themselves and on changes they observed in others. Weaknesses inherent in self-reports, as well as in conclusions based upon a small sample of parents and of group leaders applying a single treatment, can scarcely be denied. No attempt was made to assess direct effects upon children or what might be long-term effects. It can be said, however, that the program as conducted was both feasible and favorably received.

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The other 1968-69 venture into parent programs involved three Head Start classes exposed to the Hawaii Language for Preschool curriculum, coupled with a parent program emphasizing the mother's role in her child's cognitive development; three classes with the same curriculum coupled with a parent program focused on general child development; and three classes having a general enrichment curriculum, involving the same amount of individual attention from adults as the language curriculum, also combined with a parent program dealing with general child development. Because children of parents who fail to attend parent meetings cannot be expected to show effects of

such meetings, mothers who attended one-third or more of the meetings again were treated as high participants, those who attended fewer than one-third as low participants.

The first parent program began with a workshop consisting of five meetings in a two-week period. It oriented parents to objectives and practices of the preschools and enabled parents to get acquainted quickly and develop enthusiasm and an esprit de corps. Later meetings stressed what the parent could do to teach her own child at home. The parents made language-teaching games and other materials, visited classes to observe the teacher's application of the curriculum, and made some other relatively unrelated excursions. Specific homework assignments at first were responded to enthusiastically, but this initial reaction soon subsided. Apparently the parents did continue to devote some time to teaching their children, however.

The child development parent program also started with a workshop, followed by some 18 or 20 meetings. It had been planned to proceed through these meetings in three phases, involving, first, use of art materials to establish involvement and suggest activities to carry out with children; second, use of visual materials to stimulate discussions about child development and rearing; and, third, discussion and solving of problems at a purely verbal level. The leaders were not able to get the groups much beyond the second stage, however, and the parents began to insist on diversion of time to special excursions instead of discussion sections.

In the case of both programs, it was thought that better attendance might be fostered if parents were paid a nominal fee ($3.00), rationalized as covering transportation, baby-sitting, or lost employment. The general impression of the staff is that this practice did not substantially increase the attendance.

On three variables, children who had the language program and whose parents were high participants in the related parent program gained significantly more than children whose parents were high participants in the child development program coupled with either the language or the enrichment program: the total of scaled scores on the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities, the Auditory Association subtest, and the Verbal Expression subtest. Comparing only the groups that had the language curriculum but different parent programs, results favored the language-related parent programs on all three of the measures above, although significance was attained only for Verbal Expression. For all subtests on the ITPA, higher mean gains for children in the language curriculum were earned by those whose mothers were active participants in the language-related parent program rather than in the child development program.

Active participation of parents in a child development program did not facilitate performance of children in language classes, although it appeared to contribute somewhat to more effective functioning of children in enrichment classes, as evidenced by a tendency of their children to gain more than children of non-participating parents on a number of tests. In general, however, the differences in gains were not statistically significant. It also seemed that the mothers who were inactive in the child development program tended to be uniquely able to promote independently the cognitive development of their children. Evidence from home interview data suggested that they were more upwardly mobile and thus more likely to be gainfully employed than their more actively participating counterparts. Overall, no significant differences were found between test scores of children whose mothers were active participants in either program and those whose mothers rarely, if ever, attended meetings. However children in the language program

whose parents were high participants in the corresponding parent program gained more than their classmates, on the average, on almost all measures used.

Participation in a parent program apparently was associated with some differential findings of a post-interview between active and inactive mothers. The more active volunteered more frequently in the classroom, had increased feelings of powerfulness, were more tolerant of other children, and had higher vocational and educational aims for their children. The need for innovative approaches for assessing some of the more elusive outcomes of parent programs is apparent.

The original plan for parent programs in 1969-70, to be used with four classes, called for offering an individualized, home visit program to a third of the parents, with content covering both the mother's role as a teacher with respect to particular curricula being applied and child development topics. The remaining two-thirds were to be invited to participate in group meetings focused on self-awareness, which had been demonstrated to be feasible in 1967-68. The expectation was that about half of those invited would elect to do so, leaving about a third of the parents for the four classes with no program. It turned out, however, that Head Start Centers thought it would be unwise and probably impracticable to have different programs in effect within a single class or center. Hence two classes, one involving a special curriculum designed to foster achievement motivation and one the University of Hawaii Mathematics for Preschool curriculum, were offered the program of individual home visits. Two other classes, comparable with respect to the special curricula involved, were offered a program of regular group meetings with emphasis intended to be on self-awareness, awareness of needs and feelings of others, and techniques to facilitate

communication and inter-personal relationships. It was expected that those parents who failed to participate in either type of program would constitute a comparison group.

With respect to the individual home visit programs, the parents for one class seemed highly receptive and in general kept their appointments, whereas those for the second class were frequently unavailable. It is possible that this difference is largely attributable to differences in the staff members making the visits; to differences in the two curricula that were to be interpreted; to differences in the communities; to differences in conflicting demands of other interests; to differences in the support of the program on the part of Head Start teachers, aides, social workers, etc.; or to still other unforeseen and unidentified factors. Clearly the two staff members were quite different in their approach to parents, the one seeming to serve a variety of functions to help the parents in all sorts of ways rather than applying solely the intended focus on the mother's role as a teacher to reinforce a particular curriculum. It was possible that her methods, though seemingly roundabout, might be more successful than a direct concentration on the goal of the program.

The group meetings had been modeled after the parent awareness program for which feasibility presumably had been demonstrated in the 1968-69 study. Yet it cannot be claimed that this feasibility extended to the two groups in the 1969-70 study. For one group in particular, it soon became clear that the interest and attendance were rapidly deteriorating. The Center staff tried every conceivable means of overcoming the apathy, including visits to the homes to talk with the mothers individually. After a few months, the parents decided to substitute an excursion for every other meeting. Participation in the excursions was not high, however. Then the parents decided

to have meetings only once a month, and even these were poorly attended. For the second group, for which interest was somewhat greater, the mean attendance was nevertheless only 4.5.

Although, as documented in our final report for 1969-70, a few statistically significant differences in pre-test to post-test gains were found for children of high-participating and low-participating parents, for both the individual and group programs, the results were only suggestive at best. The differences found might even be due to pre-existing differences in the two categories of parents.

Despite the rather discouraging experiences in past years, the Hawaii Center currently is again trying a parent program. It is being applied in conjunction with an intensive curricular effort in just two classrooms where the special curricula in mathematics, language, and motivation are being used. Here three special teachers, members of the Research Center staff, are each responsible for the teaching of one of the curricula as well as for seeing each parent on a weekly basis to interpret what is happening in school, what particular difficulties the child is having, and what assistance the mother can give to the child. Since these staff members are actually teaching the children and discussing their needs and progress with other teachers and aides, they know the children very well. Up to this point, it can be said that the parents are highly receptive to the program.

Allow me finally to summarize some of the factors that make embarking on research into parent education programs in low-income communities a highly venturesome undertaking.

First, communities differ considerably. Ethnic and cultural factors enter. Sampling accidents leading to idiosyncratic, unpredictable, or uncooperative leadership patterns among parent groups may perturb relationships to a project and distort results. One type of group may be fearful

of discussion sessions. Another may be distrustful of persons regarded as outsiders. Still another may seek only social contacts to enable its members to forget frustrations of poverty-ridden homes.

Second, research staff hired to pursue a particular program with parents, as, for example, one with an aim to interpret a specific curriculum, may be so influenced by their special bents that they in fact concentrate on completely different goals and their attendant techniques. Thus a group leader who is hired to interpret a specific curriculum may at once become engrossed in immediate family problems of health, marital relations, a retarded child, poor nutritional status, inadequate housing, incest, and so on. Although solution of any such problems is indeed a laudable goal, immersion of research workers in them does not contribute to solution of the problem to which a particular research program is addressed.

Third, staff members who excel in establishing good relations with members of families of experimental preschool children may not be completely objective in describing exactly what the experimental treatment has been. As indicated above, they deviate from the prescribed approaches in accordance with their perceptions of immediate needs, and they may not realize that they are doing this. Hence it is very difficult for another person to understand just what has taken place and why planned procedures, which may not even have been seriously attempted, seem to have failed.

Fourth, obstructions at the school, community action program, or other agency level, albeit at times unintentional, may be formidable. A community health agency suddenly decides to introduce a program of meetings that competes for the energies of the parents. A social worker associated with a particular educational program launches a series of visits to homes. A local school board is reluctant to encourage what it regards as parent interference in the schools. Another research enterprise is already engaging the

available attention of parents. A time-consuming community improvement program is already under way. Or a special training program to improve vocational skills of mothers is suddenly launched.

Fifth, for some of the foregoing and still other reasons, generalization of results is exceptionally difficult. What seems to work in one community or with one staff member as a leader or coordinator may not work with another. Parents who do not participate in a program designed for them may, in fact, be more upwardly mobile and hence more likely to be busy with part-time or full-time employment than are those who are able to attend meetings or otherwise participate.

And, finally, it is perhaps natural to expect too much in the way of quick and readily discernible effects of parent education programs on either preschool children or their parents. Long-standing attitudes and habit patterns of adults do not change overnight. As one of our parents said, when queried as to why a program focusing in part on awareness of needs and feelings of others was not working, "Here we hit our kids, and that's the way we want it." Perhaps we should attempt to continue programs over a longer period with less intensive demands concentrated in a short time period. Then follow-up to ascertain whether the parents are still hitting their kids three or four years later might be revealing.